

Written by Ron Briggs

In 1937 my Father and Mother, along with my 2 brothers and sister, and myself moved to Lyndon Avenue Blackfen. Then Blackfen was more of a village than the busy place it is today.

The A2 known to us as the Rochester Way, was a 2 lane main road flanked by grassy banking either side, 20 feet below our back garden, or just over 6 metres to anybody under the age of 30. Where Westwood Lane goes under the bridge, there used to be a set of traffic lights, and on the corner by the conservatory business, there stood a police box like the tardis in Doctor Who. On the opposite side of the road, where Somerfield Supermarket car park is, there was a field which stretched right around to where Marino place is today. In that field stood a row of very tall trees, I'm talking very tall, to which some brave person actually climbed one of them and attached a long rope, where us kids used to swing on. Being only 4 years old, it was some time before I was allowed to have a go. To one side of that field, we had the Plaza cinema, later to become the Odeon, where on Saturdays we paid our sixpence (old money) to watch cowboy films with Hopalong Cassidy, or si-fi films featuring Flash Gordon. This was known as "Saturday Morning Pictures" for children, and woe betide anyone who sat in the rows immediately below the balcony, because they would get showered by icecream cartons filled with water. In the row of shops on the left of Westwood Parade, where I think the Master Fryer is now, was my favourite shop, I can't remember the name, but the place was a quaint old fashioned grocers. It had a sloping wooden floor, and a long counter all the way down one side, supermarket it wasn't. You could buy cheese from a huge piece, cut to size by a wire cutter, and wrapped in paper, tea was supplied in paper packages, and best of all, for a treat, my Mother would buy me a Chelsea bun, this I could unravel to make it last longer.

Who remembers Copelands newsagent on the corner of Days Lane?, they have been there for as long as I remember, and opposite, now sadly gone United Daries. Over the road, Goodriches the hardware store, further along Jacksons greengrocers, across the road, Lockyers the cycle come electrical shop. Another name to conjure up, who is still in the fen, Homepride, the DIY shop, only then you would buy nails and screws by the pound (weight not money), Lintorn's the butcher opposite Blackfen Parade, and who can forget dear old Woolies (Woolworths to you) along Blackfen Parade, which was the last shop before Maple Crescent, oh and I must not forget Fourboys, which was on the corner of my road.

Our milk and bread was delivered by horse and cart, we had young men dressed in short white coats and caps on their head, on tricycles with a box on the front selling icecream, no Mr Whippy then.

1939 rolled in, and my Mother gave me some news that devastated me, I had to go to school. How could she send me to that place, actually it wasn't so bad once you got used to it. It is still there down Ramillies Road /Sherwood Park Avenue.

Another major event that stands out was our Prime Minister declaring that we were at war with Germany. We sat around the radio (no televisions, or telephones come to that, in those days you could use the call box by The Woodman pub), but I diverse, around the radio, my Parents and older Brother looking glum. The very next day, my Dad and Brother dug an underground shelter in the back garden, very efficient it looked too, with just one drawback, it filled with water every day, so unless you were prepared to have a swim whilst using it, not good. In 1940 we were issued with the following items: 1 gasmask(guaranteed to suffocate if used), 1 cardboard box to put it in, and a purpose built air raid shelter in the back garden. This was made of corrugated iron covered with 2 foot thick concrete, and guess what, yes it filled with water every day. Two events which stand out in my mind, and I think it was about 1940/1, (1) they introduced rationing where you were only allowed a small amount of food each week per person, and (2) I was laying on top of the shelter looking up at the German planes flying over high above, when I heard a louder sound. On looking up to my right, I saw a plane coming down under the pylon wires, on clearing them, it went into a steep climb, but in that instant, I saw a crewman looking down at me as it passed. My Mother screamed at me to get down(sometimes rear gunners were known to have a potshot) . People were getting used to the sirens going off, and didn't take much notice to go to the shelters. In 1941 I couldn't understand why my Mum was crying, just because my eldest

Brother told her he had volunteered to join the army. I didn't realise that I wouldn't see him again for 5 years.

One good thing happened, they drained Danson Park Lake, so us kids could walk across to the island, the ducks didn't like it much though.

Where the school at Danson Lane now stands, it was an ack ack gun site, when my mates and I managed to get past the barbed wire onto the site one day, we were chased off by soldiers with fixed bayonets, we never stopped running until we reached the Fen. The favourite pastime for us in 1942 was collecting shrapnel from the shell bursts of the guns, and what a prize if we found an unexploded incendiary bomb. We cheered when we saw a German plane go down, and groaned when a spitfire was spiralling out of control. It was about then after the Battle of Britain, the Germans started night bombing, interrupted sleep, getting your feet wet in the shelter, with just a candle for light. Schoolwork suffered too, by having to go into the shelters during the day. About this time, an unexploded bomb fell into Jacksons, and the army was called in to extricate it. They took it to the field near the cinema and cordoned off the area where they thought it would be safe for the public to watch. I was standing outside my back garden looking at the soldiers preparing to detonate the bomb, and as soon as it went off, I started to run towards the crater. I heard a woosh and felt hot air

wave past my face, on looking down, I saw a piece of glowing shrapnel as big as my hand, at my feet. Another second sooner, I wouldn't have been here to tell the tale.

About 1943, we saw the first flying bombs come over, aptly named Doodlebugs, because of the sound of their engines, to counter this threat, the government decided that all children had to be evacuated to safer places. I went to Cowley Oxford, and I hated every minute of it, the kids there didn't like us, and we didn't like them, so there was many a punch up, also I had to attend Sunday School. The school I went to for education, had a very sadistic teacher, he used to draw two chalk marks on the floor about a metre apart (I'm being modern here aren't I). When we first came in the classroom, he made everybody jump over the lines, if you missed, you got a whack on your behind with a 2 inch thick lump of bamboo just to wake you up. You kids don't know your born nowadays.

After a year I pleaded with my Parents to get me out of there, and I came back to the Fen just as the V2s started (rocket bombs). Nobody could see or hear them coming. I was laying in bed one Saturday morning, when my curtains ripped apart, my bed arose a foot in the air, and the ceiling fell about my ears, then a huge bang, a rocket had fallen near Falconwood next to the A2. The houses either side of us had their windows blown in, but we escaped with minor damage. I'm sure that I am missing out a lot before the war finished, I do remember seeing a massive convoy of tanks, armoured cars, and lorry loads of soldiers, on the A2 in preparation for the D Day landings.

When Germany capitulated, there were great celebrations, we built huge bonfires, mainly consisting of wooden boxes raided from Jacksons back yard. We made effigies of Adolf Hitler to burn, and homemade fireworks, don't ask me for the formula, because I won't tell you.

In 1947 we had the coldest winter on record, Danson Park lake froze over, and for a modest sum, I forget how much, you could hire a pair of ice skates, this was my one and only time I tried to skate, lets just say I was no Chris Dean (Torville and Dean). I remember lining up at Browns coal yard with a trolley awaiting to be served our quota of coal, houses never had central heating, only the rich had that, and there was still rationing. To stop the pipes in the loft from freezing, my Father had a paraffin stove alight all night under the open loft door, I wonder what the fire service would make of that.

By then I was in the senior school at Blackfen, if you look at the school from the road, the boys had the classrooms that face the road, and the girls had the rooms where they are now putting up a new building. Being a progressive school, the boys had to take sewing lessons, and girls woodwork, It took me 3 terms to make a pocket.

Blackfen survived, even if it is not the quiet place it used to be, parking for cars has taken the place of front gardens, what was once a tree lined avenue, has become crossovers for the parking of cars, and try playing knock down ginger in the middle of the road, as we used to do in Lyndon Avenue. Would I wish those days back again, probably not, there were no

supermarkets, televisions, washing machines, dishwashers, DVDs, computers, ipods,
microwaves, the list goes on and on.....